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Published in:

New American Studies Journal: A Forum

DOI:

[10.18422/72-24](https://doi.org/10.18422/72-24)

Publication date:

2022

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Thorne, N., & Moss, M. (2022). Unmarked Graves: Yet Another Legacy of Canada's Residential School System: An Interview with Niki Thorne. *New American Studies Journal: A Forum*, 72. <https://doi.org/10.18422/72-24>

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Unmarked Graves: Yet another Legacy of Canada's Residential School System

An Interview with Niki Thorne

NIKI THORNE, MARIA MOSS

The residential school system, created by the Canadian government and run by Christian churches, was in place from the 1870s to 1996 and marks one of the darkest chapters in Canadian history. Forcibly removed from their families and homes, the more than 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children who went through the residential school system lost their languages, their traditions, and their cultural practices in the process. Supposed to convert Indigenous youths to a Euro-Canadian way of life, residential schools were often located far from the children's home reserves, a fact that further facilitated the children's emotional, physical, and sexual abuse by church educators. The aftershocks of such brutality manifest themselves to this day in an exceptionally high rate of suicides among the survivors' children and grandchildren.

*The Canadian government has acknowledged the crimes committed and apologized for the treatment of Indigenous children on 11 June 2008 (and on a few occasions thereafter). On behalf of the Canadian government, then Prime Minister Steven Harper admitted the two primary objectives of the residential school system: "to remove and isolate children from the influence of their home, families, traditions and cultures and to assimilate them into the dominant culture." These objectives, he continued, "were based on the assumption that aboriginal cultures and spiritual beliefs were inferior and unequal. Today we recognize that this policy of assimilation was wrong, has caused great harm, and has no place in our country."*¹

1. Steven Harper, "Canadian Federal Government Apology to First Nations" (6 December 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xCpn1erz1y8> (accessed 3 March 2022).

The so-called “Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement,” implemented in 2007, is the largest class-action settlement in Canadian history. One of the most important elements of this agreement is the installment of the “Truth and Reconciliation Committee” (TRC) by which the Canadian government tried to alleviate some of the most damaging effects of the residential school system. Between 2007 and 2015, Canada provided about 72 million dollars (CAD) to support the TRC’s work, that is, initiate the process of healing by enabling residential school survivors to share their experiences as well as get psychological and/or financial help. In addition, the TRC tried to involve the Canadian public by educating people about the history and legacy of the residential school system.

When unmarked graves were found near the Kamloops Indian Residential School in south-central British Columbia in 2021, the discovery drew attention to the roughly 6,000 students who had died during their stay at the 130 residential schools. For many Canadians, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, the discovery of unmarked graves containing the remains of 215 Indigenous children at the Kamloops site was a reminder that the sad legacy of the residential school system was far from over.

I met Niki Thorne during the “White-Indigenous Relations” conference at Leuphana University Lüneburg in 2009, where she—together with Karen McGarry and Bryan Cummins—gave a talk on “First Nations as Other: Contradictory Effects of Canada’s Official Multicultural Policy.”

The following interview was conducted online in January and February of 2022.

Maria Moss: Hundreds of unmarked graves have been discovered at former residential school sites across Canada since May 2021, when Tk’emlups te Secwepemc First Nation announced they had uncovered 215 unmarked graves at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School in British Columbia. Shortly thereafter, the Cowessess First Nation in Saskatchewan announced the discovery of more than 750 unmarked graves on the grounds of the former Marieval Indian Residential School. And close to 100 gravesites were found on the grounds of St. Joseph’s Mission Residential School of Williams Lake First Nations, again in British Columbia. The list goes on and on. What were the causes of these deaths? Why did so many students die at residential schools?

Niki Thorne: Causes of death included tuberculosis and other illnesses as well as suicide, exposure, and accidents in poorly maintained buildings. Children were often malnourished and schools overcrowded. There were few regulations, and the regulations that did exist (e.g. fire codes) were rarely enforced. Nineteen children died in the 1927 fire that destroyed Beauval Residential School in Saskatchewan. This was only a year after the school was rebuilt after being destroyed by a previous fire. Students also died in fires at Beauval in 1909 and 1920. The school was still considered a fire trap after being rebuilt in the 1930s. A 1952 fire inspection reported that school officials had apparently locked the fire escape doors. In 1956, fire inspection reported that the fire doors were nailed shut.

Many causes of death at residential schools are unknown. Of the deaths that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) was able to confirm, government and school officials did not record the cause of death for almost half (49%) of the children who died in residential schools. Nor did they record the names of almost 1/3 of the students who died (32%).

MM: Could you briefly outline the shortcomings and the accomplishments of the TRC?

NT: The TRC has been a huge success in many ways. Its creation was the result of a massive class action, leading to the largest settlement in Canadian history. From 2008 onwards, the TRC collected millions of documents, visited over 300 communities, and heard testimony from thousands of witnesses. Their work continues through the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation. One criticism, however, is that the TRC defines Canada's treatment of Indigenous people as "cultural genocide." Many argue that the word "cultural" downplays Canada's colonial atrocities—that with the deaths of so many Indigenous people and the destruction of entire communities and nations, "cultural genocide" is too soft a term for Canada's colonial agenda.

MM: Could you recommend any films and/or documentaries that deal with the issue of Indigenous trauma?

NT: To learn more about residential schools, Canadian colonialism, and Indigenous resistance, I recommend checking out [APTN Investigates “The Colonial Playbook”](#) as well as Naomi Klein’s podcast interview with residential school survivors Doreen Manuel and her niece Kanahus Manuel, [“Stealing Children to Steal the Land.”](#) I also recommend [“Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance”](#) by Alanis Obomsawin and [“Sewa Tokwa’tthere’at: The Dish with One Spoon”](#) by Dawn Martin-Hill—both documentaries by Mohawk filmmakers regarding Indigenous resistance to continued colonial encroachment. There are many, many more resources out there. These are just a few that come to mind.

MM: If you were Prime Minister, how would you tackle the continuing problems surrounding Indigenous societies, e.g. residential school survivors or missing and murdered Indigenous women? What government actions and maybe even laws are needed to effectively address these issues?

NT: Settler colonialism is an ongoing project in Canada. Clearing Indigenous people from the land to take control of territory and resources is an ongoing process, supported by federal and provincial police and governments. Canada is still deeply embedded in the project of settler colonialism. Extractive industry [a process that involves different activities that lead to the extraction of raw materials from the earth such as oil, metals, and minerals] and “man camps” [temporary housing solutions for workers in places like oil fields where the work may be seasonal] have been linked to increased violence against Indigenous women. The Canadian Justice and First Nations Child Welfare Services have been likened to the “new residential schools.”

What would it really mean to give land back and honor treaties? To negotiate on a nation-to-nation basis in good faith? The first step has to be an immediate cessation of ongoing colonial dispossession and violence. Here are some starting places:

1. The immediate cessation of land theft and development on Indigenous land. Respect for Indigenous land rights and rights more broadly, as per the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous People. This means respecting the 1997 Supreme Court of Canada’s decision recognizing Wet’suwet’en [First Nation tribal community of British Columbia] land as unceded territory and the immediate cessation of federal police enforcement of corporate interests. It means respecting Haundenosaunee [alliance among six First Nations tribal communities, more commonly known as the Iroquois Confederacy] territory stretch-

ing six miles on either side of the Grand River, from the mouth to source. It means upholding Peace and Friendship Treaties of the mid 1700s and protecting Mi'kmaq [First Nation community living in Canada's eastern Maritime Provinces] fishers from racist backlash and violence when they exercise those rights.

2. A complete overhaul of the Canadian land claims system.

A 2006 Senate committee report found the land claims process fraught with “delay” and “ineffective,” as well as “confusing, complicated, time-consuming, expensive, adversarial, and legalistic.”² The average time it takes to reach a specific claims settlement is eleven years. One claim took 26 years to resolve. Hundreds are outstanding. While land claims slowly tick by at a crawl, disputed land continues to be developed. Once settled, the Canadian government will not negotiate the return of land. This is one of the mechanisms by which municipalities and developers continue to take Indigenous land.

3. An immediate inquiry into the Canadian Justice system and Indigenous Services Canada.

Indigenous people are overrepresented in the Canadian prison system. Child welfare services on reserves are chronically underfunded. The situation has been likened to the “new residential school system,” through which Indigenous children are funneled from foster care into prisons.

While news of unmarked residential school graves was sparking international outcry, the Canadian federal government was fighting a court order to compensate First Nations children and families and fix inequalities in federally funded First Nations child welfare services.

MM: Do you expect Justin Trudeau to make a difference in “healing the wounds”?

NT: No, I don't.

After the release of the Truth and Reconciliation report in 2015, Trudeau promised to complete every single Call to Action. To date Canada has only completed 14 of 94. The Yellowhead Institute (a First Nations-led research centre) has been analysing Canada's progress, and they have found that Canada's reconciliation agenda reflects “hard work on the symbols, while avoiding the substance.”³

2. Auditor General of Canada, “Report 6—First Nations Specific Claims—Indigenous and Northern Affairs Canada” (2016); https://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/internet/English/parl_oag_201611_06_e_41835.html (accessed 1 April 2022).

The TRC states that, “The Canadian government pursued this policy of cultural genocide because it wished to divest itself of its legal and financial obligations to Aboriginal people and gain control over their land and resources”⁴ and furthermore that “settler colonialism remains an ongoing process.”⁵ This pattern of settler colonialism continues. The strategies have changed somewhat, yet the core remains the same. Indigenous people continue to be forcibly removed to make way for development.

The RCMP (Royal Canadian Mounted Police) came for the children to take them by force to residential schools. Last November, as news of residential school graves continued to flood the media, the RCMP violently removed land defenders and water protectors from unceded Wet’suwet’en territory to clear a path for a natural gas pipeline. This was in direct violation of Canada’s own 1997 supreme court ruling, which recognizes the land in question as the unceded territory of the Wet’suwet’en people.

The Canadian government cannot in good faith recognize and address the legacy of colonialism while continuing to displace Indigenous people for control of land and resources.

MM: Thanks Niki, I appreciate your taking the time to answer my questions. Hope to see you soon again in Germany!

3. Eva Jewell and Ian Mosby, “Calls to Action Accountability: A 2020 Update on Reconciliation Executive Summary” (17 December 2020), <https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2020/12/17/calls-to-action-accountability-a-2020-status-update-on-reconciliation/> (accessed 1 April 2022).

4. Truth and Reconciliation Committee, “Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future,” volume 1 (2015), p.4; https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf (accessed 1 April 2022).

5. Truth and Reconciliation Committee, “Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future,” volume 1 (2015), p.15; https://ehprnh2mwo3.exactdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Executive_Summary_English_Web.pdf (accessed 1 April 2022).

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About the Authors

Niki Thorne is a PhD Candidate at York University and a writer and educational coordinator for APTN's Wild Archaeology. Niki is a white Anglo settler from Newfoundland. She grew up on a small Sipekne'katik reserve in Nova Scotia before moving away suddenly at age ten. Today, Niki lives in Hamilton, Ontario. Her doctoral research investigates the process by which colonial violence is silenced or downplayed in dominant representations of the Canadian past, as well as implications for the present in terms of racism, power, and identity. Niki's research on colonial silences and her commitment to decolonization are deeply personal, shaped by childhood experiences and family history, including deep love for the chosen family she has found along the way.

Maria Moss received her doctoral degree in Native American Studies from the University of Hamburg in 1993 and her post-doctoral degree in neo-realist American literature from the Free University Berlin in 2006. She is one of the coordinators of the "North American Studies Profile" and the lecture series, "Maple Leaf & Stars and Stripes" at Leuphana University Lüneburg, where she has been teaching North American Studies since 2007. In addition to numerous publications on Native issues, Maria has recently branched out into the fields of ecocriticism and Human-Animal Studies. Her other fields of teaching and research include Canadian Studies and creative writing. She is one of the editors of the *American Studies Blog* (www.blog.asjournal.org/), which is part of this journal.



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